Wrestling with God: Theological Education in a Secular Age

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John A. Vissers, Knox College, Toronto

Moderator, Convener of the Board, TST Director, Vice-Dean, Past Principal Gordon, Presbyters of Oak Ridges, Vice-Principal, Faculty colleagues, Knox staff, Knox students, Board members, guests from other theological schools, friends and family, chers amis. Annyeong haseyo. I welcome you to Knox College. Thank you for being here and thank you for your greetings, your prayers, and your support as I undertake this call to serve the church and the academy.

John Updike’s breathtaking novel, In The Beauty of the Lilies, delivers a sweeping account of what happens across four generations and eight decades of an American family when a Presbyterian minister loses faith in God. In the spring of 1910 in Paterson, New Jersey, writes Updike, the Reverend Clarence Arthur Wilmot, a Princeton Seminary graduate, knew that something was wrong. Standing alone on the first floor of the manse of the Fourth Presbyterian Church, he “felt the last particles of faith leave him. The sensation was distinct – a visceral surrender, a set of dark sparkling bubbles escaping upward...There is no God, nor should there be” (John Updike, In The Beauty of the Lilies, 1996, pp.3-5).

As his faith evaporated into a mist of modernity, Wilmot concluded that his theological education had been a fraud: “What all the professors at Princeton Seminary had smilingly concealed...and the Gothic buildings had in their gracious silence masked, was the possibility that this was all about nothing, all these texts and rites and volumes and exegeses and doctrinal splits...might be twigs of an utterly dead tree...and that Presbyterianism right back to its Biblical roots was just one more self-promoting, self-protective tangle of wishful fancy and conscious lies” (Updike, pp.18-19).

In the vast literature about theological education currently available, little of it deals with this question: is what a theological school teaches true? Does it have anything to do with the so-called real world we inhabit? Do theological schools matter in a secular age? Or are they – are we - vestiges of dying churches which represent a Canada that no longer exists? In short, how can we justify what we’re doing in 2017? Who are we serving? Are we taking money from students, from churches, and government funding from the university, under false pretenses? Hence these questions: what is the institutional calling of Knox College in a secular age? What is our vocation as a theological school in the Reformed tradition in 2017?

In his widely acclaimed book A Secular Age, the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor provides a paradigm for understanding secularity. One understanding of secularity, he argues, “consists in the falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God, and no longer going to Church” (Charles Taylor, A Secular Age, p.2). As a result, congregations face a crisis, with fewer people and fewer resources. Theological schools are under pressure from the Church to address this form of secularity. And so we must.
Theological schools – as creatures of the church - have a responsibility to the church. Many believe that as go the seminaries, so go the churches. Reorienting theological schools to serve local congregations struggling with the impact of secularity requires courage on the part of both the Church and theological schools. Theological schools have to risk their institutional future to serve the church. And churches have to trust theological schools to do their job without micromanaging them. A few years ago I heard the president of an American Presbyterian seminary say this: “A theological school must be free from the church in order to be free for the church.”

A theological seminary is not a trade school for religious leaders. It is a community of faith and learning at the centre of the church’s life; a place of formation and transformation; where disciples of Jesus are creatively and faithfully educated, equipped, and empowered for service; where minds are opened, faith is deepened, capacities are increased, and skills are honed; where students are being shaped to participate in the mission of God in the world. In other words, a theological college like Knox is tasked to impact and influence those called to leadership, to touch the heart, head, and hands of would-be leaders, such that they can then impact and influence the churches they serve.

A second understanding of secularity, according to Charles Taylor, is the emptying of God from public spaces, “or of any reference to ultimate reality” in public discourse. Such a secular view acknowledges that faith in God exists, but faith is acceptable only as long as it remains a private matter. In Canada today it is expected – and contested – that we function in various spheres of activity – economic, political, cultural, educational, professional, recreational, without reference to God or to religious beliefs (Taylor, p.2 ff.)

We live in a society, Taylor argues, with people of Christian faith, people of other faiths, and people of no religious faith. A multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-religious secular city like Toronto illustrates his point. As we do our work in a secular age, Knox College is fortunate to be affiliated with a public university that continues to value and support the historic role of theology in the academy. We’re part of one of the world’s largest ecumenical consortia. And Knox has global partners around the world. Our students come from across Canada, Korea, Ghana, Cuba, Syria, Lebanon, Pakistan, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Latin America.

As we face the challenge of relating to a diverse society in which secularity has taken root, Knox is also fortunate to stand in a tradition that is committed to engaging the world as God’s world. The Reformed tradition affirms that all are created in God’s image and that the gospel of Jesus Christ brings human flourishing and healing for all creation. If so, a theological school must be free to raise a voice for critical theological discourse not only in the church, where it is sorely needed, but also in the university and the public square.

However, Charles Taylor has a third understanding of secularity beyond the decline of the churches and the decline of religious influence in the public realm. A secular age, he says, is characterized by a change in how we believe, what we believe, why we believe, and whether we believe in the same way today as did people 500 years ago, during, for example, the Reformation. This brings us to the heart of theological education in a secular age (Taylor, pp.2-3 ff.)
To be sure, a case can and must be made for the importance of theological education in relation to the church, the academy, and the culture in our time. But none of that matters if a theological school is not wrestling with faith itself, with the reality of God, with what it means to believe. It is axiomatic that a theological school is about theos and logos, and if it’s not, it ought not to call itself a theological school.

But let me be clear. I am not arguing for an arcane discipline in which we debate the finer points of doctrine. I am speaking about wrestling with God in the diversity and brokenness and suffering of our world. As a theological school in the Reformed tradition our vocation is to wrestle with God as God has been revealed in God’s crucified Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, risen and ascended.

As we wrestle in Christian theology with what faith in God means, we do not do so de novo. We do so from within a heritage of faith that upholds the sovereignty of God, the centrality of Christ, the authority of Holy Scripture, the ecumenical creeds of the early church, and the historic confessions of the Reformation. We do so humbly in confession and repentance, acknowledging our sins and failures as people of faith. We do so committed to thinking deeply and critically about what we believe in light of all that we know about our experience in the world. Such wrestling with God is painful, but it is transformative. As with Jacob, the encounter may leave us wounded and limping, but forever changed.

I return to the Rev. Clarence Wilmot in John Updike’s novel. As the story unfolds, Wilmot’s loss of faith in God has devastating spiritual, moral, financial, and relational consequences for his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. He could not, of course, have foreseen all this, but he was astute enough to know that the decision of faith that comes from wrestling with the reality of God was unique neither to him, nor to a modern secular age. Faith matters. It has always mattered. And it will continue to matter.

“Faith, says Wilmot, “is a force of will whereby Christians define themselves against the temptations of an age. Each age presents its own competing philosophies...skepticism and mockery surrounded the first apostles and wrought their deaths and tortures. Christ risen was no more easily embraced by Paul and his listeners than by modern skeptics. The stumbling blocks have never dissolved. The scandal has never lessened” (Updike, p. 18).

My prayer is that Knox College will be a community of faith and learning where students are transformed by an education that requires them to wrestle with the reality of God in the reality of a secular age. I pray that our graduates will be filled with a passion for knowing God, who God is, what God has done, what God is doing, and what God is calling the church to be and to do in our day. Disciples of Jesus who know that faith matters and that – as Knox’s historic motto promises “the Word gives light.” Prepared to serve the world God loves; sustained for ministries as pastors, teachers, spiritual care workers, community service and development workers, wherever God in God’s grace leads them. May God grant Knox College the grace to become what God calls us to be.